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**Christoph Schlingensief: Art Without Borders, ed by Tara Forrest and Anna Teresa Scheer**  
Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2010, vi+223 pp, ISBN 9781841503196

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How do you take seriously an artist like Christoph Schlingensief, who seemed dedicated to refusing and cross-wiring distinctions between the serious and the ridiculous, between political conviction and trashy irreverence? This is, after all, the controversial figure who was arrested at Documenta X (1997) for posting a sign proclaiming 'Kill Helmut Kohl!' (then Chancellor of Germany); whose film *Terror 2000* (1992) was decried as 'sexist and racist' by protestors who stormed the projection room and destroyed the reels with acid; whose production of *Hamlet* for the Berliner Volksbühne (1993) featured neo-Nazi skinheads; and who played out his own cancer and imminent death as an over-the-top (soap) opera in *Church of Fear* (2008) and *Mea Culpa* (2009). Such is the challenge undertaken by the contributors to this collection on his life and work, edited by Tara Forrest and Anna Teresa Scheer, which was published the same month as the artist's untimely death in 2010. This collection seeks to provide historical and aesthetic context to these and other provocations, as well as to make connections across the varied forms and scales with which Schlingensief worked. In their introduction, Forrest and Scheer argue that the labels of sensationalism and provocation are understandable but ultimately misplaced; Schlingensief was 'not interested in producing a particular political or pedagogical outcome, but in generating work that is fluid and open in its structure, and that encourages the audience to think critically and creatively for themselves' (p. 15).

The collection is organised chronologically, with each essay focusing on a single work or set of works from a phase of Schlingensief's career. Taken collectively, the contributions depict an artistic trajectory that was itself fluid and open-ended. Richard Langston unpacks some of Schlingensief's earliest film experiments from the early 1980s, identifying within them a confrontation between reality and artifice that would go on to characterise all of Schlingensief's work. Langston writes, 'Art's simulation of disruption sought to fake reality's breakdown but in the end it was art that was destroyed by the contingencies of reality itself' (p. 34). Schlingensief later moved from film to theatre, and Sandra Umathum describes a similar moment of crisis. As night after night of his *100 Years of the Christian Democratic Union* (1993) was panned by audiences and critics, Schlingensief finally could take it no more and burst onto the stage, covered in fake blood and apparently laying himself bare to his audience. Umathum describes this as an early example of what Hans-Thies Lehmann would later describe as the 'aesthetics of undecidability': 'Regardless of whether you were prepared to give credence to his emotions or not, you couldn't be sure if he was being sincere' (p. 60). From that point forward, Schlingensief himself would be prominently visible in all his work, as well as what Umathum describes as 'the possibility of situational resetting, of variation, of the surprise effect and the revelation of what is usually concealed' (p. 61). In relation to another of the many forms Schlingensief reappropriated, Tara Forrest describes *Freakstars 3000* (2002), a talent casting show featuring people with physical and mental disabilities. Forrest begins by addressing the limitations of the prankster persona: 'someone who just likes to have fun and who cannot, as a result, be taken very seriously' (p. 123). But she takes him quite seriously indeed, drawing on Adorno's distinctions between alienated amusement and critically engaged pleasure. Whereas some see this work as 'making fun of the

disabled contestants', Forrest argues that these ambivalent reactions 'support, rather than undermine, one of the key points that Schlingensiefel is seeking to make: That "the freak is the situation itself, which forces us to make a distinction between what is and isn't normal"' (p. 132, quoting Schlingensiefel).

I have jumped across a few examples that address different phases of Schlingensiefel's career in order to indicate one of this collection's real strengths: the cumulative effect of tracing the artist's own trajectory reveals a coherent set of concerns rigorously pursued across disparate forms. Schlingensiefel is always the primary focus, but broader dramaturgical or theoretical arguments are invoked, particularly from within an Austro-German context; in addition to Adorno and Lehmann, there are references to Joseph Beuys, Bertolt Brecht, Elfriede Jelinek, Alexander Kluge, Oskar Negt, and Peter Sloterdijk. Although the contributions work best in relation to each other, some might be useful as standalone pieces in other contexts: Florian Malzacher's writing on Schlingensiefel's final works engages productively with illness studies and the narrativization of disease; Denise Varney gives a useful retrospective survey and reinterpretation of Schlingensiefel's best-known work, the *Big Brother*-style concentration camp that was *Please Love Austria* (2000); and Solveig Gade makes a nuanced and eloquent argument for Schlingensiefel's circus-act-cum-political-party *Chance 2000* (1998) as a staging of Rancierian dissensus that is a more persuasive example than those that Rancière himself tends to choose.

But alongside these theoretical connections, the moments that captivated me most in this collection were those that evoked the sense of being immersed in the electrifying, sometimes terrifying, environments of chaos and ambiguity that only Schlingensiefel could create – whether it is a woman, who may or may not have had any relation to Schlingensiefel, locking the cinema door at a screening of *Terror 2000* that Umathum attended (p. 58); or a confrontation with police in which the event's status as art could alternatively signify safety or risk in Scheer's description of *Passion Impossible* (1997, p. 75). Paradoxically, it seems, by disavowing and ridiculing art's claim to autonomy and significance, Schlingensiefel generated a political function for art that, as Gade puts it, 'cannot be reduced to its "political remains"' (p. 99).